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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001382

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN
USTRANSCOM FOR JOHNSON-CASARES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2018-11-26
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [EINT](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: Uzbekistan Supportive on Afghanistan Transit Concepts

REF: a) TASHKENT 1351, b) TASHKENT 1287, c) TASHKENT 1260

CLASSIFIED BY: BERLINER, NICHOLAS; (A), (B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Commander of U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) General Duncan McNabb visited Uzbekistan November 18-20 to discuss possible modalities of establishing commercial transit of non-lethal supplies for U.S. forces in Afghanistan (Northern Distribution Network -NDN). The Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) gave its support in principle to the concept under the following conditions: 1) Arrangements would need to be strictly commercial and economically beneficial for Uzbekistan; 2) No transit of military cargo; 3) Air only as far as Navoi -i.e. no follow-on air to Afghanistan by Uzbekistan Airways (HY) or any other carrier; 4) No military aircraft should transit Navoi. Regarding possible mechanisms, Deputy Prime Minister Azimov indicated that the GOU expects separate commercial agreements (i.e. contracts) covering each element - air cargo, rail and road transport and local purchase. Gen. McNabb communicated to the GOU that the U.S. envisions only a small part (approximately 10%) of all NDN cargo possibly transiting by air via Navoi, with the balance transiting Uzbekistan by rail (this appeared to surprise the Uzbek side, although Azimov did not reject it). Key questions following from this visit are: a) Whether or not a separate bilateral inter-governmental agreement is necessary to cover rail transit or if the proposed NATO agreement would suffice for this purpose; b) At what point DoD should empower its commercial contractors to approach Uzbek counterparts on the issue of contracts; c) How to exercise sufficient oversight of these commercial relationships so as not unwittingly to abet the interests of Uzbekistan's ruling family; and d) Under what conditions DoD could instruct its contractors to increase rail transit volumes through Uzbekistan. Although there are tough discussions ahead, the Uzbeks are supportive of our efforts. With various transit options available and the need for more routes increasingly evident, this cable outlines a number of issues requiring Washington decision. End Summary.

GOU Supports Afghanistan Transit "In Principle"

¶2. (C) During his visit to Tashkent, TRANSCOM Commander General McNabb met with Uzbek First Deputy Prime Minister Azimov, Foreign Minister Norov and Defense Minister Berdiyev to discuss Uzbek support for Afghanistan transit. Gen. McNabb discussed the transit

of commercial cargo that would move throughout the region like any normal commercial goods on established commercial transit routes. He stressed that the sustainment cargo would be non-military in nature. All three GOU interlocutors told Gen. McNabb that Uzbekistan shares U.S. goals of peace and stability in Afghanistan and is prepared "in principle" to support this effort. As articulated by Azimov, GOU support comes with four conditions: 1) That all arrangements be made on a commercial basis and that they be economically beneficial for Uzbekistan; 2) That there be no transit of military cargo; 3) That commercial cargo flights can use Navoi airport, but that there be no air transport from Navoi to Afghanistan by any carrier; 4) That no military aircraft transit Navoi airport.

13. (C) Deputy Prime Minister Azimov said that Uzbek companies are ready to assist and could begin immediately. He noted that Korean Airlines (KAL) will take over operations at Navoi in a joint venture set to be signed on December 10 and that the Uzbeks, together with KAL, are in the process of setting up a trucking company that could transport cargo from Navoi to Afghanistan. He asserted that the joint venture is set to purchase 500 trucks and noted that Navoi is only 6 hours from the border with Afghanistan. Both Azimov and Foreign Minister Norov emphasized the element of local purchase, saying that Uzbekistan had a number of companies in various sectors that could meet the most stringent quality standards at a cost savings. Azimov said that, if the U.S. decides on local purchase, the GOU would designate a government supply agent as a single point of contact in Uzbekistan, a service for which it would charge a "modest commission."

Commercial Contracts

14. (C) Addressing the question of the type of agreement the GOU would expect, Azimov said that the Uzbeks would expect commercial contracts between the parties involved. He noted that this would mean a contract with KAL as the operator of Navoi, contracts with Uzbekistan Railways and with a trucking company (preferably, it seems with the KAL-Uzbek joint venture), and a contract for local procurement with a state supplier as the sole Uzbek point of contact. No GOU interlocutor made mention of an inter-governmental agreement being necessary for commercial transit (although we should not exclude the possibility that some sort of "chapeau" agreement may be necessary, and we are seeking clarification from the GOU on this point). Gen. McNabb explained that TRANSCOM partners with contractors around the world via commercial contracts.

Developing Navoi Still Front and Center

15. (C) All GOU reps spoke at length about the development of Navoi, referring to it several times as the "idea of President Karimov." The GOU hopes to develop Navoi into a transcontinental cargo hub, serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe. It has been clear for some time that developing Navoi is a major factor motivating the GOU to support Afghanistan transit, although Azimov was quick to point out that this transit would represent only a small fraction of the facility's future volume which, he said optimistically, would one day exceed that of KAL's main facility at Incheon in Korea.

16. (C) Azimov's grandiose talk about Navoi was probably more for internal consumption, given Karimov's involvement in the project. Azimov could also have been trying to appear less eager in discussion with the U.S. Whatever the case may be, later conversations with representatives of KAL and Uzbekistan Airways revealed that they view U.S. use of Navoi as very significant and are eager to begin operations. Uzbek hopes for Navoi are a delicate issue. Azimov did not respond when Gen. McNabb told him that the U.S. envisions that only ten percent of cargo would transit by air and the rest would come by rail along existing routes. However, he was clearly surprised to hear this.

17. (C) In this vein, it was also somewhat unexpected to hear Uzbek opposition to commercial charter flights between Navoi and points in Afghanistan, as Minister of Defense Berdiyev had earlier indicated air out of Navoi would be possible. Azimov was very specific in saying that this prohibition applied not only to Uzbekistan Airways,

but to any carrier. Uzbekistan Airways, which has a large number of idle Ilyushin 76s that would be well-suited to this purpose, was also disappointed to learn this, as one of its reps revealed to us later. It is unclear why the GOU set this red line, but could reflect nervousness about appearing too closely associated with U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, particularly in the event of an incident involving an Uzbek aircraft on Afghan territory.

Big Plans for Rail Development

18. (C) Azimov and Norov went on at some length about Uzbek plans to assist in the development of Afghanistan's rail network, noting that agreement was imminent between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to extend the rail line from Hairaton to Mazar e Sharif. Azimov also noted that Iran was active in planning a connection to its own rail network from Herat, plans that Uzbekistan hopes will someday result in rail links from Central Asia through Afghanistan to ports in Iran, shortening significantly the current 6,000 km route through Russia.

Next Steps

19. (C) The GOU could not have been clearer in its support for commercial transit. The Uzbeks see both an opportunity to profit from this and also to show that they are contributing to efforts in Afghanistan. Gen. McNabb's visit provided additional clarity as to what is possible with Uzbekistan and what the various modalities of cooperation could look like. From our perspective, it appears the following are the key issues requiring review in Washington in order for expanded transit to get underway:

Nature of Agreements: Are commercial contracts and the pending NATO rail agreement a sufficient basis to move forward, or will it be necessary to have some sort of additional bilateral "chapeau" agreement with the GOU to protect our interests? The Uzbeks did not mention one to McNabb, but this may have reflected poor GOU coordination and we should not exclude the possibility that such an agreement may, in the end, be necessary to ensure that lines of communication through Uzbekistan remain relatively free of interference. (Ambassador met with Deputy Foreign Minister Nematov on Nov. 26 to seek clarification; Nematov said the GOU would get back to us in a few days.)

Rail Shipments: At what point should DOD begin utilizing the NATO agreement (once it is finalized) to send cargo through Russia via rail?

Engagement with Suppliers: Gen. McNabb raised the possibility of sending a survey team from the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) (perhaps in January 09) to identify possibilities for local purchase. At what point should DOD engage with the GOU's procurement agent?

Sequencing: How quickly should rail volumes increase in relation to other modes, particularly use of Navoi? (The Uzbeks clearly see Navoi as the quid pro quo for enhanced rail traffic, and may balk at seeing the latter go up too fast.)

Unsavoury Partners: Uzbekistan is a corrupt country whose First Family and associates have business interests that extend throughout the economy in ways that are frequently non-transparent. It will be important for USG contractors to be vigilant to avoid deals with entities controlled by these individuals.

Risks of Perception

110. (C) Gen. McNabb made clear in his meetings with GOU officials that the U.S. views cooperation on transit and continued dialogue on human rights as necessary and compatible issues. Indeed, the Uzbeks themselves made a point of delivering a diplomatic note providing information on a sensitive human rights case on the very night of Gen. McNabb's arrival (ref. A). However, we must be cognizant of the

fact that, despite some modest steps forward, Uzbekistan is unlikely to change in any fundamental way in the near future. As we move forward on transit, it is probable that other activists will be jailed or that some well-known figure could die in prison, all of which could be used to cast cooperation on Afghanistan in a negative light. Likewise, economic engagement, as in most countries of this region, runs risks of inadvertent association with local potentates, their families and their cronies. Commercial relationships mitigate, but do not eliminate the association with the USG, which is, in the end, the final customer. We need to be transparent about what we are trying to do here and be able to respond effectively to public perception.

Ambassador's Comment

¶11. (C) Both sides have an interest in expanding transit to Afghanistan - and both are approaching it cautiously. The Uzbeks basically do not believe the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan will succeed and are hedging their bets by limiting cooperation to strictly commercial arrangements which they believe they can defend to a future Taliban government in Kabul if one emerged (which they fear will be the case). For our part, the U.S. does not want to repeat the difficult Karshi-Khanabad (K2) basing experience, nor do we wish to be tagged with "ignoring" human rights abuses in the name of security cooperation on Afghanistan. However, on balance, I reject any view that we must choose between our interests in Afghanistan and support for human rights in this instance. Transit in support of our forces in Afghanistan will help to defeat the enormous human rights threat represented to the entire region by the Taliban. Commercial arrangements will distance us somewhat from the perception of being too close to Karimov. Most importantly, we have found increasingly over the past year that renewed engagement and efforts to rebuild trust with the GOU can pay off on the human rights front as well as in the security domain. I encourage the Washington interagency community to review the proposed commercial arrangements and, if they are found to meet U.S. requirements, to move forward on them expeditiously.

¶12. (U) USTRANSCOM has cleared this cable.

NORLAND